

THE STORY-TELLER.

There's Many a Slip 'Twixt
the Cup and the Lip.

Mr Samuel Sutton, woolstapler, had a large business in Frome, inherited from his father and enlarged by himself; also a nest egg of £150,000 invested at 4 per cent in solid securities. He lived clear of the town, in a large house built by himself, and called "Merino Lodge," with lawn, gardens, conservatories, stables—all of them models. He loved business, and spent his day in the office; he loved his wife and spent his evenings at home. But this life of calm content was broken up in one month; his wife sickened and died, leaving him utterly desolate and wretched. No child to reflect her beloved features, and no live thing to cherish but her favorite dog, an orphan she had taken into the house years before, and the immortal memory of a watchful and unselfish affection. Under this stunning blow messages of consolation poured in upon him, all written with a certain sympathy, but with dry eyes. His very servants spoke with sorrowful looks before him, but he heard the squawks of the women and the guffaws of the men out in the yard. Only one creature besides himself suffered, and keenly felt the loss they had sustained. It was his wife's protégé, Rebecca Barnes. Mrs Sutton always intended her to be house-keeper, and the widower now told her that she would have to occupy that position.

The years rolled on. The Rev. Joe Newton (son of a deceased sister of Mr Sutton) was forty-one and looked forty-five; Rebecca Barnes was thirty-eight, and looked twenty-five. Mrs. Newton (Mr. Joe's wife) was forty, and looked fifty; and uncle Sutton himself, though fifty seven, looked five-and-forty, thanks to sober living, good humor, and a fine constitution. Joe was always in debt, though often relieved by Mr. Sutton.

Who can foretell? The stout woolstapler was seized with a mysterious malady, frequent sickness, constant depression. He struggled manfully, went to his office ill, came back no better; but at last had to stay at home. By-and-by he took to his bed. Rebecca wrote to Joe Newton. He came and found his uncle eternally sick, and turning yellow. Joe spoke hopefully said it was only jaundice, but went away and told a different tale at home. There he and his wife, demoralized by debt, discussed the approaching death of their great benefactor in hypocritical terms, through which eager expectation pierced.

'You are sure he has not made a fresh will? That woman Rebecca has his ear.'

'Make your mind easy, dear. He told me all about it himself not six months ago. He leaves us and our children all his money, except £5000 to Rebecca Barnes.'

'Five thousand pounds to a servant?' 'And only £200,000 to us,' said Joe, hazarding a little humor.

'Tied up, I'll be bound.'

'Well, dear,' said Joe, 'even if it should be, our children will benefit, and we shall have enough.'

'Five thousand pounds to that woman? And not tied up of course.'

'Joe could have told her from his uncle's own lips why he was to have a life interest only in that large fortune.'

'Your wife is vain, selfish, and extravagant, and you are her slave. She shall not waste my money as she has yours. It is all secured to you and your children.'

But Joe preferred peace to admonition, and kept his uncle's reasons to himself.

Mr. Sutton was tenderly nursed night and day by Rebecca Barnes and a young orphan girl she had brought into the house, and she herself had been brought thirty years before. He was attended by Dr. Stevenson, an old friend. But neither physic nor nursing could stop the fatal returns of sickness that prostrated the strong man. At last Dr. Stevenson and a physician he had summoned from London, told Rebecca to prepare for the worst. He must die of inanition, and that shortly. Re-

becca sent a mounted messenger to Joe—'Come at once, or you will not see him alive.' Joe sent back word he would come by the first train. But before he went his wife gave him instructions.

'Now, mind, if he knows you, and can speak, do nothing. But if he is insensible, you must begin to think of your interests you are executor; you told me so.'

'One of them.'

'And the one on the spot. There are quantities of plate and valuables in the house. You must fix seals, and ask Barnes for her keys.'

'Will not that be premature?'

'No stupid, it will be just in time.'

'Hum! she had been a faithful servant. I am afraid it would wound her feelings.'

'The feelings of a menial? Besides, there are two ways of doing these things. Of course you will flatter her, and say you only want to relieve her of responsibility. But mind you secure her keys or I'll never forgive you.'

'Very well,' said Joe; 'I suppose you are right; you always are.'

He reached the lodge, and Rebecca met him with a despairing cry, and led the way to the sick room. They found Mr. Sutton yellow and gasping for breath.

'He is dying,' said Joe, awe-struck; 'he will not live an hour.'

Presently the patient gasped desperately and tried to raise himself.

'Lift him,' cried Rebecca; and seized a basin, while Joe's strong arm raised him. Instantly there burst from the patient a copious discharge of black blood, or what looked like it.

Joe turned pale, and cried, 'Oh, it is the substance of the liver!' and he felt faint at the sight.

Rebecca stood firm, and felt the patient's pulse. It was scarcely perceptible. 'He is going,' she said. Then, looking round in despair, she seized a table-spoon, filled it with brandy slightly diluted, and, opening his mouth, placed the spoon at the root of the tongue, and so got the contents down his throat. As he retained it, she repeated the dose three times. The patient lay motionless, no longer gasping, but just faintly breathing, as men do before life's little candle flickers out. They sat down on each side of him in silence. He had been a good friend to both.

By-and-by Joe's dinner was announced. He asked Rebecca to come down and eat a morsel with him. Rebecca was hospitable, but could not leave the moribund even for a moment.

'No, said she: 'I saw her die, and I must see him die.'

Joe assured her he would not die till night, and said he could not eat alone. Accustomed to oblige, Rebecca consented, though unwillingly. She summoned an elderly woman that was in the house, and bade her watch him, with the young girl, and send down to her the moment there was any change. Then she went reluctantly. After a hasty meal and two glasses of port, the Rev. Joseph Newton opened his commission. He began as directed. He dilated upon her long and faithful service, and then told her he knew she was not forgotten, or he would have felt bound to take care of her. Whilst he delivered these sugar-plums he did not look her in the face, and so he did not observe that her eye was fixed on him and never moved. Having thus prepared the way, he proceeded in a briefer style to say that he was his uncle's executor, and a great responsibility was about to fall on him; unfortunately he could not stay here all night to discharge those said duties; so perhaps it would be as well to entrust him with her keys before he left.

Then Rebecca, who had hitherto been keenly observant and silent, said, very quietly, 'Give you my keys, sir? What! do you mistrust me?'

'Of course not; my only object is to relieve you of so great a responsibility where there are so many servants and so many valuables about.'

'Valuables about? That is not my way, sir. There is nothing loose in this house more than I keep my eye on.'

'An excellent system,' said Joe, warmly; 'I promise to follow it. But, to do so, I must have an executor's power; come, Rebecca, I must return by the five o'clock train; please oblige me with your keys; the places that have none you and I will seal up together.'

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Rebecca Barnes rose from the table, and the eyes that had watched him like a cat from the first syllable he had uttered flashed lightning at him. 'You have spoken a woman's mind; take a woman's answer; what! you couldn't wait till the breath was out of that poor dead body before you must lay your greedy hands upon the goods!'

Joe rose in his turn; 'Rebecca, you forget yourself.'

'No; I remember too well; twenty years ago you did your best to ruin me; and when you couldn't, you trifled with my affections, held me in hand for years, and flung me away without one grain of pity; you broke my heart, and made me a servant for life; now you insult the faithful servant—you that were false to the faithful lover; trust you with my keys, you false-hearted—; no, sir.' And she folded her arms superbly; 'Go back to your wife, and tell her if she wants to rob him she must kill him first, and me too; for while he lives I am mistress of this house, and she and you are—nobody.' Then she turned her back on him as only a tall, disdainful woman can, and flew wildly upstairs to her dying master.

After all, once in twenty years is not often to vent one's outraged feelings, and those who smother their fiery wrongs too long owe nature an explosion. But Rebecca Barnes, though wild with passion, was by nature anything but a virago. So, even as she flew up the stairs, the rain followed the thunder, and it was in wild distress, not fury, she darted into her master's room, hurried the other women out of it, and flung herself on her knees by his side.

'Oh, master, master,' she cried, 'is it come to this? They wish you dead; they want your plate; they want your china; they want your money; they don't want you; for all the good you have done, only one poor woman will shed a tear for you.'

Then she began to stroke his hand and wet it with her honest tears. Presently she sprang to her feet with a scream, and eyed her master keenly; 'you are better.'

'I am; there was something growing inside me; I always said so; it has broken; I feel lighter now.'

Rebecca flung herself on her knees again.

'Oh, master! then don't give in; try, try, and you'll get well; do, pray, get well to spite these heartless creatures; they couldn't wait; they demanded my keys, they were so hot to take possession.'

'Joe and his wife?'

'Put her first; he is her slave; he has no heart nor conscience when she gives the order; but let us baffle them; let us get well.'

'I mean to,' said he, slowly, and then went off to sleep. He slept some hours, and on awaking asked for brandy and yolk of egg. He took this at intervals. Dr. Stevenson came, examined him carefully, looked at what had come from him, and pronounced him out of danger.

During his convalescence Mr. Sutton ordered Rebecca to write and ask his lawyer to come to him at once with two witnesses. Rebecca had cooled by this time, and began to be a little alarmed at the turn things were taking; so she said she had been a good deal put out about the keys, and he must take to heart every word an angry woman said.

'Mind your own business,' was his reply; 'write as I bade you.'

The lawyer came with his witnesses and Rebecca retired. When she reappeared she seemed so uneasy that he said to her—

'You needn't look as if you had robbed a church; I have not disinherited Joe.'

(To be Continued.)

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